

## [Review] S. Bohan (2019) Twenty Years of Life: Why the Poor Die Earlier and How to Challenge Inequality

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**Book Review: *Twenty Years of Life: Why the Poor Die Earlier and How to Challenge Inequality*. Suzanne Bohan, Island Press: Washington**

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In her eloquent and forcefully argued book, Suzanne Bohan investigates and articulates the role of a range of social, political, and environmental factors in causing and exacerbating inequalities in health outcomes between the rich and poor in the USA. In doing so, she draws attention to those things, such as low social status, and overly harsh school discipline, which while not obviously *medical*, nevertheless have profound consequences for health outcomes. Importantly, while these factors can impose serious deprivations of health on vulnerable people, their significance can often be hidden by the apparent importance of more obvious considerations; when large American cities such as Flint, Michigan can go without safe drinking water for years, it may be difficult to recognise the importance of evaluating the impacts on health of a school district's disciplinary policy for instance. As Bohan discusses however, failure to do so can have disastrous consequences for young people, and their families and communities.

In *Twenty Years of Life*, Bohan introduces her readers to the people most affected by a wide range of socially determined inequalities in health which are so harmful to so many, and to the people working to address these harms. She talks to programme administrators, fund managers, teachers, community organisers, and most importantly, the people who use, influence, develop, create, and benefit from social, educational, and environmental projects intended to address health inequalities. It is her engagement with this last group, with those who use and benefit from the programmes she investigates, that provides the real strength of this book. In talking to those most affected by the inequalities created by the unjust distribution of the social determinants of health, Bohan identifies those most at risk of being failed by

unjust systems which are simply not designed to help them. This is an important and effective strategy; often, literature exploring the phenomena of the unequal distribution of health and longevity is impersonal, focusing on macro-level data which provides a comprehensive description of the scale of a given issue. Such data is vital for those working in public health and its associated disciplines, but it is not always the best way of providing a compelling or accessible narrative with which to inform non-experts or policy-makers. Data alone is not always the most effective foundation for an argument for change.

Bohan addresses this concern by exploring and articulating that vital macro level data, and contextualising and illustrating it with reference to the stories and experiences of those she interviews. To illustrate, her discussion of the long term health impacts of “zero-tolerance” enforcement of school disciplinary policies would be highly informative, and of great value, if it were to focus only on population data. When Bohan illustrates that data with a detailed discussion and examination of the experiences of the numerous students and former students with whom she has spoken, the effect is revelatory, affecting, and deeply compelling.

I have focused here on Bohan’s examination of educational policy for the simple reason that it is the aspect of the book that I found most illuminating. However, her discussion of other social determinants of health, such as access to clean water, safe social spaces for recreation and exercise, and of course, social status are equally informative, and are also illustrated with the compelling personal narratives of her interview subjects. In this way, she explores academic themes which may be familiar to those working on questions relating to the social determinants of health. This may be seen as one faint criticism of the book, and something that an academic audience may feel is a limitation of the work – that it explores ground with which many are already familiar, at least at the level of theory. However, Bohan presents her discussion of these themes in a novel and informative way, and as I have tried to articulate, this is one of the key strengths of the book. Indeed, it is

what will make it most valuable to a broad audience, including those who may harbour reservations on its utility.

Those familiar with the subject of health inequalities as a result of social factors will find the book to be a valuable source of case studies, as well as a carefully presented, clearly written discussion of the particular context of socially caused health inequalities in the USA. Conversely, a wider audience will be presented with an accessible narrative which presents complex information on an important subject clearly, and with reference to a series of affecting individual stories. In doing so, Bohan offers a compelling argument for the importance of recognising the impact of non-medical interventions on public and individual health.